

Hell in New Jersey: The Passaic Textile Strike, Albert Weisbord, and the Communist Party

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# Hell in New Jersey

## The Passaic Textile Strike, Albert Weisbord, and the Communist Party

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From January 1926 until March 1927, some 15,000 textile workers in Passaic, New Jersey, struck against a 10 percent wage cut and poor conditions and to defend the right to unionize. Amid the anti-labor Roaring Twenties, the strike captured the imagination of the workers' movement and of many radicals and liberals, putting Communists in the center of the struggle to reenergize the labor movement. Although ultimately defeated, the Passaic workers' struggle came to symbolize the entire working class in the 1920s. As Theodore Draper, historian of the Communist Party (CP) in the 1920s, put it: "The Passaic strike showed that, in a decade of 'prosperity,' cruelly exploited and violently downtrodden workers, abandoned by everyone else, would accept Communist leadership. The combination of underpaid immigrant workers, a moribund A.F. of L. union, and antediluvian employers created a vacuum which the Communists for a time filled with great success against tremendous odds." The strike highlighted what would prove crucial for the growth in industrial unionism in the 1930s: left-wing organizers outside of the framework of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) using innovative methods such as mass picketing to overcome a hidebound craft-union leadership that refused to organize unskilled workers, often immigrants and women.<sup>1</sup>

This article analyzes how the CP came to play a leading role in this strike. First it briefly examines the conditions in the Passaic textile industry that left an opening for innovative leadership. Then it places the Passaic strike in the context of the CP's internal political situation. Rather than an accident, Communist leadership of thousands of militant workers built upon the party's previous work in the industry and region, tapping into decades of militancy and radicalism among workers in the area.

## The Communist Party

The CP was born in the summer of 1919, after left-wing dissidents split (either voluntarily or by expulsion) from the Socialist Party. Largely concentrated in more than a dozen semiautonomous language federations, these left-wingers united to support the Bolshevik Revolution and oppose what they saw as the Socialist Party's reformism. They were divided by political and ethnic background as well as political perspective; for several years there was no *one* CP, but several hostile underground groups, each claiming to be the real Communists in the United States. In this period, the authority of the Bolsheviks—who, amid the devastation of the First World War, had realized the first successful socialist revolution—recruited more people to communism than the activities of these groups. Altogether, the Communists counted tens of thousands of supporters. These included members of important unions like the garment trades in New York City or coal miners in Illinois and Pennsylvania, as well as nonunionized workers. However, incessant factionalism, Red Scare repression, and hostility by the trade-union bureaucracy devastated the membership of the Communists. Only at the insistence of the Bolshevik-led Communist International (Comintern) did the competing groups form one united party in 1921 (officially called the Workers' Party but referred to here as the CP). Soon after this, the CP emerged from the underground as the Red Scare receded.

The history of the CP in the 1920s is beyond the scope of this article.<sup>2</sup> Although the Bolshevik Revolution was popular among much of the labor movement—including leaders like William Z. Foster, who joined the CP in the early 1920s—the party was often politically disoriented and increasingly isolated in the early and mid-1920s. After an attempt to tail

dissident Republican Senator Robert La Follette's 1924 presidential bid was aborted by the Comintern, Communists became even more isolated.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, despite a large turnover of members, the party's membership stabilized. Reliable membership figures are hard to find, but in 1922, the unified Workers' Party counted some 12,000 dues-paying members; by June 1925, there were 14,500 members.<sup>4</sup>

The party was divided into three factions. One was led by C. E. Ruthenberg, a former left-wing Socialist from Cleveland and a party founder, along with Jay Lovestone, a former Socialist youth leader from New York City. They counted among their cofactionalists many former Socialists, including several university-educated leaders. Another faction led by Foster enjoyed wide support, especially among union members. A smaller group, also including many unionists, supported James P. Cannon, a former organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). These groups had originally cohered in 1923 in response to the party's farmer-labor and La Follette maneuvering: Ruthenberg's supporters tended to be more enthusiastic, while Foster and Cannon were more trepidatious, reflecting their closer ties to the labor movement. By 1925–26, many of the original political differences between the groups had diminished. Instead of principled struggle over the line and tactics of the party, factionalism devolved into nasty attempts to gain and maintain leadership. The factions themselves often had internal divisions, highlighting that political clarity had ceased to be their goal.<sup>5</sup>

Up through the start of the Fourth National Convention of the Communist Party (held in Chicago in August 1925) Cannon's and Foster's supporters were united against Ruthenberg and Lovestone; they won a majority of delegates to this convention. This convention was marked by internecine factional warfare and the heavy-handed intervention of the Comintern. This reflected the Stalinization of the Comintern; in the party's early years, the Comintern had provided crucial assistance, but now it more and more sought a pliant leadership that supported the increasingly Stalinist leadership in Moscow. In 1925–27, the American party was still in an intermediate period in its Stalinization.<sup>6</sup>

In the lead-up to the convention, the Comintern had mandated a "parity commission" to hash out divisive issues. Although the commission was evenly divided among the factions, the real power was held by the

Comintern representative, Sergei Gusev (known as P. Green). During the convention, Gusev threw his support to the Ruthenberg faction. Cannon advocated accepting the diktat while Foster wanted to fight it within the Comintern, and their alliance broke down. As a result, although Ruthenberg's supporters found themselves the new "majority" faction by late 1925, the party itself was more divided than ever. Ruthenberg was the party's leader; Foster led its trade-union work; and Cannon focused on the party's defense arm, the International Labor Defense (ILD). Foster and Ruthenberg continued their factionalism unabated, while Cannon formed a "faction against factionalism" in an unsuccessful attempt to break down the factions and focus the party on political issues. Compounding this factionalism was the division of the party into more than a dozen semiautonomous foreign-language federations and its lack of roots in the English-speaking working class.

As Gusev's role at the 1925 convention made clear, power in the party leadership was based on obtaining the support of the Comintern. By now this meant uncritically adapting to whatever position came from Moscow. Thus the cynical joke: why is the CP like the Brooklyn Bridge? Both are suspended by cables. In fact, at the outbreak of the Passaic strike, most of the leadership of all the factions was in Moscow, trying to obtain support at the Sixth Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Comintern.

One disputed issue between the factions was "dual" unions. Should Communists work within the AFL, which remained the largest trade-union federation despite its pro-capitalist leadership; or should Communists try to organize new radical, militant unions? The early CP supported the IWW and called for new unions. Lenin, in *"Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder* (1920), denounced what he saw as the pro-capitalist and class-collaborationist AFL leadership but argued that Communists should work within the federation, because most unionized workers were in AFL-affiliated unions. This was the basis on which Foster had been recruited to communism. Based on this perspective, he built the Trade Union Educational League (TUEL), a pan-union opposition group that sought to unite class-struggle militants and fight for a more militant union movement.

Much of Foster's efforts, since his pre-Communist attempts to organize slaughterhouse workers in Chicago, were focused on the "amalgamation"

of existing trade unions into industrial unions. Foster examined this issue in a pamphlet published shortly before the Passaic strike, *Organize the Unorganized*. He recognized that many workers were not unionized and that much of the leadership in the AFL opposed organizing unskilled workers. "The organization of the unorganized millions of workers is primarily the task of the left wing," by which he meant Communists and supporters of the TUEL. In the section on "the industries where there are no A.F. of L. unions," Foster asserted that the "course is clear."

We must form new unions and bring them into affiliation with the broad labor movement as quickly as practicability permits. Or if there be independent unions in such industries we must give them our active support and work for their affiliation to the A.F. of L. . . . In those industries where there are A.F.L. unions, but where these unions are so weak and decrepit, with corrupt leadership, hidebound agreements, etc., that is is impossible to stimulate them into the necessary activity to mobilize the mass militant organization campaigns or defend their interests in strikes arising therefrom, our program is more complicated . . . In spite of our most urgent desire for unity with the general labor movement, we will often, under these circumstances, be compelled to form independent unions. But . . . we must from the outset follow a program for the affiliation of these unions to the A.F. of L. We must be keenly on our guard not to get into a dual union position, by declaring against the A.F. of L. in principle or by permitting an open warfare to develop against it.

Foster acknowledged that "often these [AFL] leaders will propose such terms of affiliation as to make their acceptance tantamount to the sacrifice of the interests of the workers." But he stressed that "that greatest danger that the left wing confronts in such situations is the persistent dual union tendency to pull away from the old unions and to establish new and independent organization[s] which isolate our forces from the main body of organized workers."<sup>7</sup> This transformed the original tactical objections to organizing dual unions—that it divided the labor movement and isolated Communists from unionized workers—into a principle that the AFL should have a monopoly on the trade-union movement. Furthermore, there was a contradiction at this policy's core: it recognized

that militants outside the AFL would have to organize workers whom the AFL bureaucracy refused to organize, but it confused union organization with AFL membership. It did not allow the possibility of militants—much less Communists—organizing the unorganized outside the graces of the AFL. Although these problems would be partially resolved in the 1930s through the industrial unions in the Congress of Industrial Organizations—which split with the AFL over organizing unskilled workers—the party's work in the textile industry in the 1920s underscored the difficulties with this perspective.

### **Textile Workers in Northern New Jersey**

By 1915, at least one-fourth of workers in New Jersey toiled in the textile industry, which included cloth making, knitting, embroidery, lace making, rug weaving, and felt hat making.<sup>8</sup> The Paterson-Passaic district was at its population peak, with some 331,000 people. Paterson (with about 135,000 people living some 20 miles from the party's headquarters in Lower Manhattan) provided silk; Passaic (65,000 people, 15 miles) provided wool; and Lodi (10,000 people, about 15 miles) dyed textiles. Additional mills of various sorts were located throughout Passaic, Hudson, and Essex counties, forming a textile archipelago.<sup>9</sup>

These workers—mainly immigrants and their children—faced horrible conditions and low wages.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, unlike in lower-wage textile centers such as Allentown, Pennsylvania, there were many male textile workers in New Jersey. Relative to textile workers elsewhere, these male workers were skilled and well paid. This drove the New Jersey textile manufacturers to compete by raising the rate of exploitation through hiring more women (at lower wages than men), increasing the looms worked by each worker, avoiding unions, and cutting wages. As many large companies moved to the South or other low-wage areas, the silk industry in New Jersey became dominated by smaller companies. In contrast to Paterson's many silk mills, Passaic had fewer wool mills (often owned by German companies), but these employed more workers. This increased the concentration of power in the hands of both owners and workers. More millhands working at fewer mills were easier to organize; similarly, fewer mill owners were better able to coordinate their attacks on labor.<sup>11</sup>

The Paterson silk industry had long been a center of labor radicalism; between 1888 and 1894, workers went on strike 31 times. Many Jewish workers were socialists, and the Socialist Labor Party (led by Daniel De Leon) had an important presence. Even more prominent were Italian anarchists. By the end of the nineteenth century, according to historian Kenyon Zimmer, Paterson had become “a central hub in the global anarchist movement.”<sup>12</sup> In February 1912, a dissident faction of the IWW controlled by supporters of De Leon led a silk workers’ strike in Paterson that spread to Passaic before being defeated.<sup>13</sup> In March of that year, a mass meeting of more than 1,000 workers from several local mills called for a general textile strike and demanded a 25 percent wage increase. As many as 12,000 textile workers in Passaic and Hudson counties struck. The next year, the main IWW faction, under the leadership of William D. Haywood, organized the more famous Paterson silk strike: 25,000 silk workers struck 300 silk and dye works for almost five months.<sup>14</sup>

In 1916, more than 1,600 mill workers struck demanding higher wages. In 1919, Socialists at the head of an independent union led another strike of 12,000 workers for six weeks that won reduced hours and a significant pay increase, although the employers fired several militants and refused to deal with the union.<sup>15</sup> In 1925, a report by a committee studying the textile industry in the New York City metropolitan area singled out the “labor problem” and “the development of trade-unionism” as threats to the viability of the industry there. To remain competitive with their counterparts elsewhere, the report implied, North Jersey textile mill owners needed to break the militancy of their workers.<sup>16</sup>

By the mid-1920s the stage was set for a major conflagration: the mill owners felt compelled to drive down wages and increase productivity, and the workers had a tradition of militancy and radicalism. What they lacked was leadership: northern New Jersey textile workers had been unable to create lasting organizations. In Paterson, the silk workers’ union was small, while in Passaic, unions were largely nonexistent. The AFL-affiliated United Textile Workers (UTW) did not count any members in Passaic. Although decades later a former leader of the AFL silk workers’ union in Paterson blamed Passaic workers themselves for their lack of organization, the fact is that the AFL had no interest in organizing unskilled textile workers.<sup>17</sup>



## The Passaic Strike and the Communist Party

This situation exploded in September 1925 when Botany Worsted Mills, the largest mill in the area with 5,275 workers, and Garfield Worsted Mills, with 925 workers, announced a ten percent wage cut along with a lower overtime rate. The mill owners justified this by "general market conditions," including a recent wage reduction in New England.<sup>18</sup> In response, Gustave Deak, a Hungarian American worker, approached the UTW to help fight the cut, but its leadership refused.<sup>19</sup> It then fell to the Communists to organize workers to fight the attack. Albert Weisbord, a Communist, had recently moved to Paterson, where he was a silk worker. With the help of local comrades, particularly Deak and the Scottish-born mill worker Ellen Dawson, Weisbord organized a United Front Committee (UFC) against the wage cut.<sup>20</sup>

The UFC elected a committee to protest a supporter's firing. In response, the mills fired Deak and other committee members. On 22 January 1926, workers responded by striking. By early February, nearly 8,000 workers were on strike. By spring 16,000 workers from several mills were on strike under the UFC's leadership. They demanded higher wages, time-and-a-half overtime pay, better conditions, union recognition, and no reprisals against union members.<sup>21</sup>

The role of the CP in the Passaic strike was controversial at the time, and it remains so among historians. The strike was precipitated by the poor conditions and low wages of workers in Passaic, combined with the textile capitalists' desire to increase productivity and cut pay. This is underscored by a contemporary textile workers' strike without Communist leadership: in 1925, some 2,200 workers struck the American Thread Company in Willimantic, Connecticut. For nine months, the workers, under the (anti-Communist) leadership of the UTW, faced 1,700 scabs protected by state police. The strike ended in a defeat for the workers.<sup>22</sup>

The Communists did not cause the Passaic strike, but they did make this strike, unlike the American Thread strike, emblematic of labor struggle in the 1920s. They offered a vision of struggle lacking by most of the AFL leadership. During the strike, Ruthenberg stated that, "It is no secret that our Party initiated the movement among the

Passaic workers.” Communist Anthony Bimba, in his *History of the American Working Class* (1927), underlined that in Passaic, “for the first time in the history of this country a strike was conducted on a large scale under communist leadership.” Martha Stone Asher, a high school student from Brooklyn and a member of the Communist youth group, recalled decades later that “The party assigned people to go to Passaic and encourage the workers, whose concerns were primarily economic and not political, to take strike action in their own defense.” The strike provided an example of militant workers struggling under the leadership of open Communists. This is a testament to the determination of the workers and the willingness and ability of Communists to provide leadership—and to the bankruptcy of the official AFL leadership. As Cannon wrote in 1930 (after having been expelled from the CP for his support for Leon Trotsky), “By their services and skill the Communists led the workers with a moral authority that needed no mechanical manipulation; moral authority, which, in the final analysis, is the rock on which real leadership is based.”<sup>23</sup>

### Albert Weisbord and Communist Leadership

Was the Passaic strike a result of planning by Communists, or was it a spontaneous uprising that the Communists opportunistically seized upon? How much credit for the Communist effort goes to the organizer in Passaic, Albert Weisbord, and how much goes to the party as a whole? Finally, how was the Passaic strike connected to the factionalism that was roiling the CP at the time? With the passage of time, and the expulsion of many of the leading Communists involved in the strike, teasing out answers to these questions has proved difficult. This is particularly so in the case of Weisbord, who was expelled from the CP in 1929 and subsequently headed his own organization—the Communist League of Struggle—that denounced almost every Communist leader from the 1920s. Based on records in the archives of the Comintern in Moscow, and other documentary sources, it is now possible to offer approximate answers.<sup>24</sup>

Weisbord was born in 1900 in New York City of “poor Russian-Jewish parents.” During his childhood, his father graduated from operating a

newsstand to running a coal distribution business to owning a small textile factory. In 1921, Weisbord graduated from City College in New York, the “proletarian Harvard” from where Ruthenberg faction leaders Jay Lovestone, William Weinstone, and Bertram Wolfe (all of whom were of East European Jewish extraction) had earlier graduated. Although he claimed to have joined the Brooklyn Socialist Party while in high school, Weisbord admitted that he “had not, however, become much involved” in politics. At City College, he focused on chess, warranting several mentions in the *New York Times*; he was also elected to Phi Beta Kappa in 1920.<sup>25</sup>

After City College, Weisbord enrolled at Harvard Law School. As a law student, he became active in the Socialist Party, eventually becoming a member of its National Executive Committee and a leader of the Socialist youth group, the Young People’s Socialist League. He eventually broke with the Socialists and joined the CP in Boston (then under the leadership of John J. Ballam, a Ruthenberg supporter who was in charge of the party’s work in the textile industry). As Weisbord tells it in *Passaic Reviewed* (1976), he decided to “immerse [himself] in the working class,” by working at a textile mill in Massachusetts. He observed that much of the country’s industry was centered not in large cities like Boston or New York but in surrounding “industrial villages” like Lawrence, Massachusetts, or Paterson, New Jersey. If not so unique as he later claimed—both of those cities had witnessed large, radical strikes in 1912–13—Weisbord’s sense did pave the way for deepening Communist influence in the working class. In this period, under Ballam’s supervision, Weisbord helped organize UFCs of textile workers in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. He also joined the Ruthenberg faction.<sup>26</sup>

In 1925, after breaking up with his wife, he moved to Paterson. According to Weisbord’s account, he contacted Bert Miller (the party name of Benjamin Mandel), a former teacher who was the party’s organizational secretary for the New York area. Weisbord later claimed that Miller, a fellow Ruthenberg supporter, “knew very little about” his new position and “was astonished at my desire to plant myself in the ‘sticks’ and said he would help me in what way he could.” This help consisted of supplying the contact information “of some Jewish weavers in Paterson.” Although he allowed that these “Jewish comrades helped me to solve the difficulties that arose,” on the whole, Weisbord later

dismissed them as “no real Communist Party branch, but only a Jewish federation group.” They were apparently uninterested in the silk workers, since “they were mainly interested in the Russian Revolution and in factional fighting.” In any case, Weisbord became a member of the silk workers’ union in Paterson, which had just struck.<sup>27</sup>

In *Passaic Reviewed*, Weisbord again claimed that at the time of the Passaic strike he “was well-prepared for the coming struggle, infinitely better than the leaders of the Communist Party, which party I dragged by the hair into the fight, against the snarling will of its leaders who finally succeeded in treacherously stabbing it to death.” In his telling, the CP was “infantile, faction-ridden, Russian-dominated” and “completely untested in workers’ organization and struggle.” He added: “Even though I was a member of the party at the time, I received no help from them at the time.” In his later pamphlet, Weisbord denounced the “worthlessness of the C.P. leaders.” He expressed special animus for Ballam, who “didn’t know the beginning of the job.”<sup>28</sup>

Weisbord was central to the Passaic strike. He stoked the workers’ discontent into a year’s blaze. He earned the hatred of the local police and mill owners for the same reason he gained the respect of strikers. “He seemed everywhere at once,” recalled Passaic resident Mary Zavada 50 years later. “Revving up the strikers at meetings, writing pamphlets, leading parades, enlisting artists, social workers and notables in the Passaic cause, overseeing the efforts of the General Relief Committee to aid the strikers’ families and putting in a fair amount of time in court and jail.”<sup>29</sup> In his moment, Weisbord was one of the most dynamic labor organizers in the country, and (with the possible exception of Foster) the most famous Communist in the trade-union movement.

Nonetheless, the Comintern files indicate that much of Weisbord’s later recollections were faulty. In underscoring his own role, these memories tended to diminish the role played by other Communists, including Miller and Ballam; downplay how the strike was a result of long-standing collective discussion within the party; and de-emphasize his connection to Ruthenberg and Lovestone’s faction. Rather than being taken unaware by the strike, the leadership of the CP had prepared for a strike months in advance. Before the strike, Communists at the party’s

highest levels had discussed the issues that would come to the fore during the strike—particularly whether the UFC was a dual union.

### Communist Organizing in Northern New Jersey

Weisbord's account 50 years after the strike ignores the groundwork that had been done by the CP in the region. Northern New Jersey was not virgin territory for the Communists in the mid-1920s. Being merely a commuter train away from New York City no doubt was both a strength and weakness for Jersey Communists. New York City was the main cultural and political center of the United States, home to many of the party's top leaders, much of its important trade-union work in the garment industry, and, at various times, the party's editorial and political apparatuses. It was also a strong base of support for the Ruthenberg-Lovestone faction. New Jersey was part of District 2, comprising the New York metropolitan area. The district had its own organizer (for most of the strike, leading Ruthenberg faction member William W. Weinstone), political bureau, and district executive council. Below the executive council were city central committees overseeing individual branches. In 1924, there were some 120 branches in District 2, comprising some 2,500 members. Most were in New York City's four main boroughs (i.e., not Staten Island). Nonetheless, by 1924 there were city central committees in Hudson County, Essex County, Passaic, and Paterson, and party organizations in Middlesex (Perth Amboy), Union (Elizabeth and Linden), and Mercer (Trenton) counties. In turn, each city central committee oversaw the work of several units, often divided by language and geography.<sup>30</sup>

The most important northern New Jersey city for the Party was Newark, where Communist activity among East European immigrants went back to 1919. In 1923, the CP itself, the party's youth group, and the ILD opened branches in the city. The same year, the *Daily Worker* opened an office there. Communists were active in the furriers' union in what was the second largest fur processing center in the country. In the summer of 1926, Communists organized a 17-week strike of more than 350 mainly Greek restaurant workers until the court issued an injunction against picketing.<sup>31</sup> In Paterson, there were English-language (10 members),

Jewish (45), Polish (5), and Ukrainian (8) branches in 1924. In Passaic—where there is evidence that the first Communist group was organized in 1919—there were German (11) and Jewish (18) branches in 1924. Since less than half the branches in District 2 submitted reports for any month, it is likely that there were other ethnic branches in the area. Even though northern New Jersey was largely industrial, most of the district's industrial nuclei seemed to be in New York.<sup>32</sup> In any case, in 1925 the Communists felt confident to try to stand candidates for governor and other state offices, as well as mayor of Union City (George Perlman, the party's gubernatorial candidate, received 591 votes—out of more than 900,000 total votes—concentrated in Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Middlesex, and Passaic counties).<sup>33</sup>

Besides demonstrating a Communist presence in northern New Jersey, the Passaic strike reflected the Party's perspective in the textile industry. This work began in Boston, whose organizer, Ballam, was a Ruthenberg supporter. As in New Jersey, New England's largely immigrant textile workers had a history of militancy (as shown in the 1912 Lawrence strike led by the IWW) but were largely unorganized by the 1920s. According to a report by Ballam, "in February 1924, the Workers Party created a United Front Committee of Textile Workers" in Lawrence, comprising representatives of the UTW, Francophone, Italian, Russian, Armenian, Lithuanian, German-speaking fraternal organizations, and other workers from the mills.

The UFC's goals were the organization of the unorganized, "the amalgamation of all existing textile unions into one powerful industrial union . . . based upon the shop committee and the mill as the unit of organization," and "a congress of Textile Workers and the establishing of a National Textile Bureau." In turn, the UFC organized the Lawrence Textile Union, which Ballam stated "is independent of the United Front Committee and sends its delegates and supports it financially." Ballam added that within the UFC and the Lawrence Textile Union, Communists "are organized as a fraction under the discipline of the Party and the direction of the District Executive Committee." Ballam's report implies that the UFC was organized in counterposition to the TUEL. Several times, he repeated that the TUEL in New England was moribund and "a useless appendage to the Party" that was "withering away because it has

no present function” for aiding Communist work in the labor movement. Like everything else in the party at this time, the UFC had factional significance. By the spring of 1925, there were six UFCs organized in the Massachusetts textile industry, under the broad leadership of Ballam.<sup>34</sup>

In New Jersey, the Party’s textile work seems to have arisen out of the party’s work among the various needle trades unions, a traditional base of militant left-wing Jewish and Italian workers in New York City. In the mid-1920s, the Communists played an important role in these unions, including in the leadership of some locals. In November 1924, in a letter to Charles Zimmerman (a Ruthenberg supporter in the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union in New York City), Foster referenced a “plan to reach out to other centers to organize the silk workers” in Paterson. In spring 1925 a long report by the TUEL’s Needle Trades Section mentioned the party’s activity during a months’ long silk strike in Paterson. “The result of this activity was that the Workers’ Party became the leading factor in the strike, succeeded in securing determining representation on the strike committee, and in sending in the official strike organizer. The Workers’ Party was the only outside organization recognized as a leader of the strike.”<sup>35</sup> Several reports written by Miller indicate Communists had been paying attention to the Paterson-Passaic textile industry since 1925.<sup>36</sup>

According to another report, from early February 1925, “a serious crisis exists in the Associated Silk Workers.” The writer—Foster’s son-in-law, Joseph Manley—criticized the local for not doing enough to carry out the party’s perspective. Minutes from a DEC meeting a week later authorized “a committee to mobilize the entire Paterson membership for work in the silk industry.”<sup>37</sup>

By the fall, the District 2 leadership had shifted from Krumbein, a Foster supporter, to Weinstone, a Ruthenberg supporter. The new district leadership stepped up the campaign in Paterson and Passaic; Weisbord was an integral part of this. As early as 15 October, he is mentioned in this role in a report by Bert Miller; on 23 October, at a meeting of the district leadership, Weinstone proposed that “Weisbord leave his job and devote himself to the situation” and be put on the party payroll. Besides Weinstone, Ruthenberg supporters Benjamin Lifschitz and Jack Stachel and Foster supporters Joseph Zack and Krumbein were present. Two days later, the DEC minutes noted that both Paterson and Passaic “have

become active under the textile situation.” The report added: “Weisbord has been sent into Paterson and Passaic districts to exploit the textile situation. He has gone to work there in the mills.” It is possible that Weisbord volunteered to move to New Jersey, but rather than acting on his own, Weisbord was an agent of the district leadership with the mandate to resolve problems in the local branches and prepare a strike.<sup>38</sup>

### The Lead-Up to the Passaic Strike

The *Daily Worker* in the six months before the Passaic strike was full of articles on the textile industry. The paper carried several articles by Weisbord about poor conditions in the Rhode Island textile mill where he was working. In August and September, the paper ran notices about a textile workers conference, sponsored by the “General Amalgamation Committee,” to be held in New York. New Jersey representatives were expected. (It is not clear if this conference took place, or if it accomplished anything.)<sup>39</sup>

In early October, the *Daily Worker* carried a small notice (datelined Philadelphia) announcing the wage cuts in Passaic. In late October, the paper carried a one-paragraph article noting that some 380 Passaic silk workers were striking. Then, on 29 October, the *Daily Worker* carried two articles by Weisbord, both datelined Paterson. The first mentioned that Weisbord “has taken charge of the strike” of silk workers at the Passaic Worsted Spinning mill; the second denounced the leadership of the UTW and the Association of Silk Workers of Paterson for their opposition to class struggle and hailed a Communist leader in the needle trades unions. The next day, an article by Louis Kovess, editor of the party’s Hungarian journal, predicted a “rebellion brewing” in the Passaic mills. In late October, Kovess and leaders of other language federations, along with Weisbord and Benjamin Gitlow, held a meeting of more than 100 people to organize a UFC. The *Daily Worker* announced there would be future meetings, with speakers in Italian, Hungarian, Polish, and “Slavic.” On 6 November an article, “Passaic Mill Workers Organizing the Fight against the Wage Cut,” asserted: “in case the weavers do not organize, they will suffer a wage cut and starvation they never had before.”<sup>40</sup>

Behind the scenes, the district leadership and Weisbord continued preparing a strike. As one report put it on 25 October:



[The] District Industrial Committee has drawn up a policy for situation in Paterson and Passaic. District has put a representative in the field. Party branches of the textile areas have been mobilized to help. Several strikes in Passaic and West New York have developed. Our comrades taking an active part. Organization campaign started in Paterson . . . Aiming toward a broad united front campaign.<sup>41</sup>

On 31 October 1925, after the Botany mill had fired Deak and other militants, Miller wrote to Ruthenberg listing 18 steps that the Party was taking in Passaic. He ended his letter, "It is planned to do organization work of this character with a view toward a strike sometime in December."<sup>42</sup> The correspondence indicates that the party's leadership expected a strike and had discussed Weisbord's work. Whether or not it is true, as Weisbord claimed in 1931, that Foster and Cannon opposed his plans, it is unbelievable that Lovestone and Weinstone "refused to be against the organization of the unorganized but they refused to help." Indeed, Weisbord's work was carried out in Weinstone's district, and the district leadership viewed this as a factional cudgel against Foster.<sup>43</sup>

A reading of the *Daily Worker* indicates that the Party continued to organize in the Passaic area. In November 1925, Communists in Paterson met to commemorate the Bolshevik Revolution, as did their comrades in Bayonne, Jersey City, and Newark. A series of articles by Kovess urged organizing the unorganized and struggling for better conditions and wages. At times running as a TUEL column, these referenced a committee dedicated to amalgamating the different textile unions.<sup>44</sup>

The first battle in Weisbord's war to organize the New Jersey textile workers was not fought in Passaic or Paterson but in Hudson County. On 24 October, some 250 workers under Weisbord's leadership struck the Hillcrest Silk Mills in North Bergen, against the introduction of the multiple-loom system (in which workers work more looms). The Hillcrest strike was a dress rehearsal for the Passaic strike several months later. Immigrant workers—this time largely Italian—braved police violence and intimidation. Weisbord was arrested twice for disorderly conduct. The workers were organized into a UFC of Textile Workers, the ILD mobilized to support the workers, and veteran

radicals built solidarity. Alongside Weisbord, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Carlo Tresca spoke at a mass rally in December 1925.<sup>45</sup> The strikers remained steadfast in the face of violence and an attempt by a local Catholic priest to end the strike. The company obtained court injunctions against picketing and threatened to move the plant to North Carolina if the workers did not end the strike. Although the result of the strike is not clear, the *New York Times* reported several months later that the plant had laid off 200 workers. In 1926, the firm's owners opened a mill in High Point, North Carolina. By 1931, Hillcrest had leased its New Jersey plant to another company.<sup>46</sup>

Somehow Weisbord kept abreast of the situation in Passaic and Paterson while engaged in the battle in North Bergen. In late December 1925, the *Daily Worker* carried an announcement: "We have elected textile workers employed in the mills here to become worker correspondents and send the *Daily Worker* regularly articles on conditions in the Passaic textile mills." It was clear that a strike was imminent: On Christmas Eve, the paper carried an article by Art Shields, "Paterson Textile Strike Make a United Front to Strike for the Eight-Hour Day January 4." On 4 January, three weeks before the Passaic strike began, the Trade-Union Committee of the party's leading Central Executive Committee formed a Textile Committee to coordinate the party's work in the industry. It included Ruthenberg supporters Gitlow, Weisbord, Miller, and Weinstone, along with Foster supporters Krumbein and Zack.<sup>47</sup>

The Passaic strike, although not caused by the Communists, reflected long-standing Communist efforts in the region and industry, including sending Weisbord there. None of this undermines Weisbord's role in the strike. It also does not mean his sense of isolation was not legitimate. Weisbord was the transmission belt between the Communist leadership and the strikers. It was easier to make decisions in New York than to implement them in Passaic. "It is true that he worked under the close supervision and direction of a party committee," Cannon recalled, "but it's a long way from committee meetings in a closed room, off the scene, to the actual leadership of a strike on the ground."<sup>48</sup> Even during the strike—when Weisbord was no doubt aware of the attention of the party leadership on the strike—he complained: "I am all alone except for speakers."<sup>49</sup>

## Dual Unionism

A key issue for Communists during the strike was dual unionism. Because of Foster's domination of the party's work in the trade unions, any hint of dual unionism was excoriated. In the party, the Comintern's favor for Ruthenberg's faction threatened Foster's control of the party's trade-union work and threw the future of the TUEL into doubt. During this time, the Ruthenberg leadership aimed to replace Foster's supporters with their own supporters (particularly Gitlow) and absorb the TUEL into a broader Communist front in the unions. Cannon—who in the period after the August party convention often voted with Ruthenberg's supporters—complained in October 1925 that the party's Central Executive Committee (which was dominated by Ruthenberg supporters) tended to discuss trade-union issues without informing the party's Trade Union Department (which was dominated by Foster supporters).<sup>50</sup>

Ruthenberg's faction was less fixated on avoiding dual unionism than Foster's. Signals from the Comintern were still unclear. In the six months after the August 1925 party convention (which included the lead-up and start of the Passaic strike), the factions jockeyed for support from Moscow. In February 1926, for example, the American Commission of the Sixth Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Comintern reaffirmed Ruthenberg's control of the party but endorsed Foster's position on the trade-union question. The commission declared that "secessionist movements and formation of parallel trade unions should not be instigated or encouraged in any form."<sup>51</sup>

On a broad level, this mixed message from the Comintern was part of the Stalinization of the party, as Moscow played one faction against the others.<sup>52</sup> On a practical level, however, the reality was that in many industries, organizing the masses of workers ignored by the AFL bureaucracy would require struggling against the AFL leadership—and perhaps organizing new unions. Thus the UFCs, in the face of AFL hostility and indifference, organized what were in reality *new* unions. Strictly speaking, the UFCs were not *dual* unions—since the AFL had abandoned these workers—but for Foster, anything outside the existing unions was dual unionism.

The debate over the UFCs should be seen in the context of factional warfare. In the lead-up to the strike, leading Communists had discussed

whether Weisbord's textile work was dual unionist. By then, the UFC had begun to collect dues and issue membership cards. According to the correspondence in the Comintern archives, Foster's supporters objected. In January 1925, Bert Miller wrote to Ruthenberg and Jack W. Johnstone (a Foster supporter in the TUEL leadership) about the UFCs. He agreed that "a change in the present scheme must be made undoubtedly" but stressed "that if we *suddenly* ceased the present form of dues payment and per capita tax, it would demoralize the workers." In West New York, Miller noted, "our comrades have been instructed to immediately make arrangements for joining the Associated Silk Workers," while making sure "that the workers retain their mill council." The situation in Passaic was more complex. Pushing the workers to join the UTW would not work, he asserted, since the AFL union was "totally discredited"—its journal had "even [gone] so far as to take ads from the Botany Worsted Mills." Miller stressed that the UTW "would undoubtedly use every opportunity to step in and break up the forces of the workers at the behest of the employers, if we g[a]ve them the a chance." He suggested making "a thorough investigation of the entire textile situation, the strength of the various unions, their jurisdiction, and policy, and in the light of the facts brought . . . formulate our entire policy." Meanwhile, Weisbord's work continued.<sup>53</sup>

The highest levels of the party leadership continued to review Weisbord's work.<sup>54</sup> The UFC continued to be contentious. In late October 1925, Miller wrote to Ruthenberg, underscoring that "Comrade Weisbord is doing some fine work" in Passaic. As quoted earlier, the letter predicted a strike in several months' time.<sup>55</sup> In early November, Weinstone reported to Jack Johnstone that "we are now proceeding with the formation of Mill Committees and organising the workers into the United Front. Headquarters have been established in Passaic and all regular steps taken—stationary, etc.; membership books, etc., are being issued." He advocated "*one big national drive*" and stressed that it was "absolutely necessary that the Massachusetts and Rhode Island, as well as Philadelphia sections should be ready to join in the movement."<sup>56</sup>

Ruthenberg responded to Miller: "Are we organizing some sort of new union in the textile region, or what is the proposal?" Ruthenberg stressed, "We are of course opposed to organizing still another union in the textile

industry.”<sup>57</sup> A week later, Miller sent the national office “an outline of Weisbord’s plan in connection with work in the Textile area.” Weisbord emphasized that in his view the UFC should organize workers:

What to do with those who are being pressed now and are unorganized and where other unions will not or dare not enter the fields. In that case the United Front Committee . . . ceases to become a mere propaganda body. It then enters into the actual organizing of workers and gets all workers, say on strike in a particular mill, into a mill council, gets the council to pay dues to the Central Bureau of the United Front Committee of Textile Workers and conducts their strikes [sic] for them. At the same time there is made an attempt to broaden the strike and the movement wherever possible.

Weisbord noted that the UFC should press for amalgamation of the various textile unions, but “if after all our efforts there will be no convention to discuss amalgamation, then we must keep these affiliated [mill-based] bodies. We shall not go into an area where another union has already stepped in but we must be prepared to organize the workers in such an industry where about 95 percent are unorganized. Constantly we must state our purpose is the formation of One Union in the Textile Industry and to Amalgamate all forces.”

In his cover note, Miller underscored: “It is absolutely essential that the Industrial Committee of the CEC [Central Executive Committee] take this up, consider it carefully, and make recommendations or approval, so that we may continue our work along the lines of the approved plan.” Several days later, Ruthenberg responded to Miller, again highlighting that the UFC was proposed to collect dues, noting that “it smacks very much of a dual in union in spite of all we may say to the contrary.”<sup>58</sup>

A week later Miller wrote to Ruthenberg, defending the UFC. He noted that “it is only because such a state of terrorism exists in the mills that an outside force must take the initiative.” Indeed, Miller proposed that the party redouble its efforts in the textile industry, and that Weisbord be made “National Textile Organizer and should travel from one textile center to another during the next few weeks or so.” In a report several days later, Miller argued that it was “necessary to do away with the formal

and mechanical conception of Comrade Foster and his group on the whole question of dual unionism.” More than 80 percent of all workers—especially the unskilled—were unorganized and the AFL bureaucracy was uninterested in organizing them. Thus, Miller continued, “We will have to exert pressure through the existing unions and also from the outside.”<sup>59</sup>

On 25 November, Ruthenberg replied to Miller, shifting his position: “The work being done by Comrade Weisbord has the full endorsement of the CEC so far as the general character of this work is concerned.” He signaled a more flexible approach: “While we cannot at all times say that we will not form a new union in the textile industry, we must first make the effort to unite some of the many existing unions and use these as the basis for the organization campaign.” Ruthenberg’s letter gives an indication that Comintern pressure had contributed to the shift in his views. “The general policy you are following in the textile [industry] is . . . in line with the resolution of the National Convention.” He added that this policy “was subject to considerable debate in the Parity Commission, but was adopted with the support of Comrade Green [Gusev].”<sup>60</sup>

The continued correspondence indicates that leading Communists continued to debate the issue—and that the discussion divided along factional lines. In early December 1925, Miller wrote to Ruthenberg complaining that Johnstone “was here this morning and he said definitely that the C.E.C. is opposed to the policy being followed by Weisbord in the New Jersey Textile district” because it was dual unionism. “He wanted it stopped at once, altho he has a very hazy idea of what he wanted us to do.” Miller asked for “written approval of the work being done, and authority to go ahead.” Ruthenberg responded that “the statement by Comrade Johnstone which you report . . . is too sweeping a statement.” Instead, the “only decision of the Trade Union Committee . . . was that the individual members are not to be affiliated directly to the United Front Committee.” By this time, in any case, the work in the textile industry in northern New Jersey had already led to one strike, in Hillcrest, and was about to result in another, in Passaic. On 21 December, Weisbord wrote to Miller, indicating that the UFC had organized almost 900 mill workers in Passaic.<sup>61</sup>

## The United Front Committee, the American Federation of Labor, and the Passaic Strike

The issues that Miller and Ruthenberg had discussed became central to Weisbord's actions during the strike. The UFC grew to some 10,000 people during the strike; it did not openly call for a new union but advocated that the 16 existing unions in the industry amalgamate into one industrial union and that they organize unorganized workers. It claimed that "the strike is thus not merely a rebellion against the intolerable conditions but a determined struggle for *organization*" and "the beginning of a determined effort to organize one union for the whole textile industry." Shortly after the strike began, the party decided that workers should try to join the AFL-affiliated UTW. The UFC tried to get AFL leader William Green to "call a conference of all textile workers' organizations to unite them in one textile union under the banner of the A.F. of L."<sup>62</sup>

The AFL tops wanted nothing to do with the strike. In response to fund-raising appeals, Green declared that "The membership of organized labor should not contribute funds." The AFL leadership's attitude dovetailed with the anti-strike "Citizens' Committee," which placed advertisements in the local papers urging workers "to reject these communist leaders." The advertisement cited the "sober judgment" of the AFL that the UFC was "not a legitimate labor organization" and that the strike leaders were "communists who are using the honest deceived employees of the woolen mills as dupes for their own political glory and the spread of their political beliefs." Rebuffed by the AFL leadership, the UFC issued membership books and dues stamps. It built strike solidarity, raised relief funds, and, with the ILD, defended strikers from repression. Eugene Lyons, then a Communist sympathizer, edited *Hell in New Jersey*, an illustrated pro-strike booklet for the relief committee, of which some 150,000 copies were sold.<sup>63</sup>

Alfred Wagenknecht, a Communist leader (and Foster supporter), was assigned to organize the office and raise funds. By late March 1926, he estimated that \$61,000 had been donated. Area unions were also helping. Deak, the UFC's secretary, recalled that \$30,000 was spent weekly in relief. By early March, some 1,000 families depended on the committee's relief

effort. Wagenknecht produced a silent film, *The Passaic Textile Strike*. Communists used the film to raise money and build solidarity with the strike around the country. In November 1926, some 3,000 saw the film in New York (accompanied by a Russian orchestra), raising \$2,000.<sup>64</sup>

The strike exposed the limitations of the Communist policy of working within the AFL unions at all costs, as advocated by Foster. As Palmer put it, “Weisbord held a mirror before the eyes of communist trade union policy.”<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, the TUEL’s lack of involvement in the Passaic strike seemed to confirm Foster’s factional opponents’ arguments that the TUEL, so closely associated with the Communists (and within the party, with Foster), had outlived its usefulness to advance class-struggle politics in the trade unions. “The action at Passaic did indeed violate both the letter and spirit of Fosterite trade-union policy,” Cannon recalled decades later.<sup>66</sup> In a factional sense, the strike gave the lie to Foster’s stress on what he called (in the middle of the Passaic strike) his opponents’ “inability . . . to conduct any kind of mass struggle” since “they have no experience with the masses. They do not understand the first thing about mass work.” Instead, even as the TUEL played no role in that strike, Foster advocated that the party “stick to the basic policy of the Trade Union Educational League.”<sup>67</sup>

The Ruthenberg faction—the Lovestone faction after Ruthenberg died in March 1927—used the Passaic strike to bolster their trade-union credentials. In mid-1927, a leading Lovestone supporter presented the Comintern’s American Communism a list of his faction’s trade-union supporters, including Weisbord, Deak, and five other Passaic strike leaders. That summer, in the lead-up to the party’s Fifth National Convention, internal correspondence in the Lovestone faction labeled Weisbord “our best mass leader, a potential foil to Foster” on the central committee. In the region as a whole, support for Lovestone’s faction was more than three times greater than for Foster’s, and in Passaic, it was more than six times greater.<sup>68</sup>

## The End of the Passaic Strike

The strikers braved police brutality and economic privation for almost a year. The Passaic police—under the leadership of Abram Preiskel,



commissioner of public safety, and Richard O. Zober, chief of police—attacked strikers and their supporters. For example, on 2 March 1926, a dozen mounted policemen and 65 policemen on foot attacked a 2,000-strong picket. When they were unable to break the pickets, they summoned five fire companies who used six streams of high-powered water on the crowd.<sup>69</sup> Nearly 1,000 strikers were arrested during the strike. Strikers' bail ranged from \$250 to \$1,000. Some strike leaders were sentenced to as much as six months in jail, while others were given suspended sentences. The New Jersey courts issued an injunction against mass picketing; while agreeing that "this strike has been singularly free from acts of violence by the defendants and their sympathizers," the court ruled that mass picketing itself was a violation of the "right" of the mill owners to run their plants with scab labor.<sup>70</sup> The strike became a national issue. *Labor Defender*, the journal of the ILD, underscored that "The beastly manner in which the police of New Jersey have participated in the strike with weapons ranging from tear bombs and fire hose to clubs and horse's hoofs has become an infamous byword in America already." The article concluded that "A victory for Passaic is a victory for labor everywhere."<sup>71</sup>

Workers in other unions built support. The New York City furriers—themselves in the midst of a 17 weeks' long general strike—donated money and sent representatives to Passaic. In March 1926, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers donated 20,000 pounds of sugar, while the bakers' union donated four trucks of bread.<sup>72</sup> Radicals like Elizabeth Gurley Flynn rallied to the Passaic strike. Non-Communists like left-wing economist Robert W. Dunn and Socialist Norman Thomas were arrested when they visited Passaic to support the strikers.<sup>73</sup> This support helped legitimize Communist labor organizing for the first time since the mid-1920s. Writing in the *Nation*, radical journalist Mary Heaton Vorse observed the "hope" in the strikers' "singing picket line": "Passaic crawling in its winter slush and snow watches its mill workers make a full-hearted protest against the intolerable conditions in the mills, against the inhuman and unbearable wage cut."<sup>74</sup> Cannon recalled that Passaic "really put the party on the labor map" and "revealed the Communists as the dynamic force in the radical labor movement and the organizing center of the unorganized workers disregarded by the AFL unions."<sup>75</sup>

The mill owners were determined to defeat the strike. The wool companies' concentration into fewer, larger firms made capitalist unity easier to accomplish than had they been divided among small companies like the silk manufacturers in Paterson. They instigated the formation of the anti-strike Citizens' Committee and tried to make communism, and not the textile workers' conditions, the central issue of the strike. On 10 April 1926, the Passaic police raided the UFC office, arrested Weisbord, and rifled through files looking for proof of a connection between the strike and the CP.<sup>76</sup> "Who are the leaders of the Passaic strike?" the Citizens' Committee asked in a July advertisement in both of Passaic's daily newspapers. The advertisement highlighted the radical credentials of supporters of the strike. Two weeks later, the Citizens' Committee produced documents seized by the police that supposedly showed that the CP's leadership was directing the strike.<sup>77</sup>

As Weisbord put it in his pamphlet *Passaic* (1926), "By the end of the twentieth week of the strike it had become apparent that the Passaic strike was to go down in history as the most stubborn and bitter battle in the textile industry." This posed a dilemma to the Communists. The strike could not be won in Passaic or by traditional means alone. For complete victory, the strike itself would have had to be spread to textile workers elsewhere. This had always been Weisbord's vision. In October 1925, at the start of the Hillcrest Silk strike, the *Jersey Journal* reported that this strike, part of "a far-flung battle-line to involve all the textile workers of America, is gathered from the organizer of the present walkout, Albert Weisbord."<sup>78</sup> After his expulsion from the CP, Weisbord recalled that his strategy had been to use the textile strike in Passaic as a springboard to a general strike in the city, a silk strike in Paterson, and, ultimately, "to enter vigorously into Lawrence, Massachusetts, and to coordinate with strike action there and nationally." Such a national organization campaign would have required denouncing the treacherous role played by the AFL and UTW leadership and perhaps launching a new national textile union. This was probably beyond the capacity of the CP at the time. Party leaders disagreed over the extension of the strike; according to Wagenknecht, in March 1926 Weisbord advocated such a move but Weinstone opposed it.<sup>79</sup>

Without extending the strike, the only alternative was to seek support from the AFL, which had more resources than the UFC or the CP. In

April, Weisbord made clear (in the words of the *Newark Evening News*) that he was “willing to permit the A.F. of L. to harvest the crop which he sowed” by “turn[ing] over to it a union in which 7,000 are enrolled and paying dues” and “fade from the picture.”<sup>80</sup> The public support for the Passaic mill workers, especially among rank-and-file AFL workers, also put pressure on the AFL leadership.

Nonetheless, the AFL tops saw Communists, and not mill owners, as their main enemy. The UTW did not want anything to do with the Passaic workers. Over several months, the UTW rejected UFC attempts to affiliate. The UTW leadership made it clear that the condition for taking over the strike was that Weisbord leave. Harry F. Hilfers, head of the New Jersey Federation of Labor, claimed that Weisbord had indicated his willingness to resign from the strike leadership if his presence was an obstacle to a settlement, something that Weisbord later denied. Weisbord’s resignation was still not enough for the AFL. According to the *New York Times*, Hilfers “said that no organizers would be sent into the Passaic district by the A.F. of L., until after the mill workers had returned to their jobs and the present controversy had been settled.” The paper quoted him: “We will have plenty of time to organize the mill workers after they have gone back to work.” In other words, rather than use the thousands-strong strike as a springboard to organize the Passaic workers—much less the textile industry as a whole—the AFL wanted nothing to do with the strike.<sup>81</sup>

The *New York Times* quoted Weisbord that if the AFL’s textile union organizers “want to come in and cooperate with us they will be accorded a warm reception.” He added: “But if they are contemplating coming in here to undermine our present union they will get a very hot reception.”<sup>82</sup> Still, in late April Weisbord and Deak wrote to Thomas McMahon, the textile workers’ union president, requesting “a conference with the officials of your organization” and representatives of the UFC. McMahon replied (a week later) that although “we are endeavoring to assist the Textile workers as best we can in their present battle in Passaic,” that “we believe any further outside conferences would be hurtful on the principles that ‘too many cooks spoil the broth.’” In other words, the strikers should be left on their own.<sup>83</sup> New Jersey governor A. Harry Moore echoed this approach in his attempts to mediate the strike. In April 1926, he refused to

meet with Weisbord and (in the words of the *New York Times*) “dropped the peace parley like a hot potato.” In response, 5,000 strikers voted to retain Weisbord as their leader. In July, Hilfers stated that the strike had been doomed to defeat from the start.<sup>84</sup>

Not willing to dedicate itself to a major textile campaign beyond Passaic, the Communist leaders sought a nonaggression pact with the AFL leadership for the UTW to accept the Passaic workers. Over Weisbord’s objections, the party jettisoned him and began to tone down their rhetoric in August 1926. In mid-August, the UTW admitted the UFC on the condition that Weisbord and more than 20 other supposed Communists be purged. A spokesman for the UTW stated, “We will never allow any communist or those thought to be communists into the United Textile Workers of America.” Accepting Communist discipline, Weisbord agreed to these terms. The party labeled the absorption of the UFC into the AFL a “great victory.” Publicly, Weisbord claimed,

The union had become so strong that, once it secured settlement or affiliation it could carry on without [Weisbord]. So the United Front Committee declared it was ready to accept even the humiliating conditions laid down to affiliate. This forced the hand of the A.F. of L. bureaucracy. They were compelled to take in the strikers.<sup>85</sup>

To be sure, forcing the broader labor movement to address the issue was a success for the Communists. Under their leadership, the Passaic workers’ struggle had galvanized public opinion. People far from the Communists had been forced to support the textile workers, both out of sympathy and fear of Communist influence. Delegates at the AFL convention in Detroit in October 1926 discussed the Passaic strike. According to the *New York Times*, liberal New York Rabbi Stephen Wise, who had tried to mediate a settlement to the strike, “urged support” for the strikers and “declared that the textile workers had broken their promise to deal with the accredited A.F. of L. union if the Communist leaders dropped out.” Delegates met Wise’s speech with “outbursts of applause” and a standing ovation at its end.<sup>86</sup>

While highlighting the dangers of eschewing all work outside of the established unions, the Passaic strike also demonstrated the limitations of

establishing new unions, especially by a group as isolated and small as the CP. If the Communists did not have the ability to lead a national organizing campaign, and could not win the strike by themselves, seeking support from the AFL was neither unrealistic nor unprincipled. Cannon stressed in 1930:

To say that the affiliation amounted to a betrayal of the workers is childish nonsense that ignores all the facts. The strike was virtually at an end at the time. It had been prolonged for eight or ten months, and the workers were simply worn out . . . The greatest error was the opportunistic manner in which the affiliation was carried out. This was particularly noticeable in the publicity of the strike committee, which began to be tainted with defeatist apologies to the labor fakers.<sup>87</sup>

At the AFL convention, Dawson soft-soaped the AFL bureaucracy, claiming that the strike “centered around one great principle” that formed “the keystone of the American Federation of Labor.” This principle was “the right to organize, to deal with employers thru their own chosen representatives and to compel the employers to recognize the American principle of collective bargaining.” Later in the speech, when highlighting that the strike had “dramatized the whole question of the organization of the textile industry,” she underlined that the strike “demonstrated that not only can the textile workers be mobilized for resistance to inhuman conditions, but that they can be organized under the banner of the American Federation of Labor.” She claimed later in the speech that “The American Federation of Labor has a glorious record for advancing the well-being and happiness of millions of American workers by lowering hours, increasing wages, and bettering working conditions.” While on one level this was all true, it ignored that the AFL bureaucracy since Gompers’s time had rejected organizing unskilled workers, and the Green leadership was unprepared and unwilling to confront the changes in American industry.<sup>88</sup>

The right to organize *was* central to Passaic; but more damaging was the AFL leadership’s refusal to organize the unorganized. The experience of the 1930s later showed that it would be easier to force the country’s industrialists to come to terms with unions than to convince the AFL

leadership to accept industrial unions comprising unskilled workers. In a letter to Weinstone in October 1926, Lovestone underlined the defeatist nature of this attitude:

I have had some experience in recent months in dealing with the so called progressives in the trade unions and they have all said that we have gone even too far in hiding our communist face in Passaic. For instance, none of them would believe that we have not taken in at least four hundred new members into the Party. None of them would believe that the [Communist youth group] has lost the very few members it has had in Passaic. These are errors we have made in Passaic. I am also told that at one time or another instructions were given to keep the Daily Worker out of Passaic. I hope these reports are untrue but if they are not, then we have made some very grievous errors in the campaign.<sup>89</sup>

Over several months, the UTW settled the strike that it had always opposed. It is not surprising that the hidebound UTW did not reach a better settlement than the Communists. The mill owners were resolute in their opposition to the strike.<sup>90</sup> One settlement was reached in November, another in mid-December, and the final in late February 1927. The piecemeal settlements rescinded the wage cuts and guaranteed the right to organize but were otherwise a disaster. Despite the promise of no discrimination against union members, militants were fired and blacklisted. In February 1927, Deak, then the president of the Passaic UTW local, called the settlement a “defeat.” In 1928 the UTW expelled the local because its leaders participated in the Communist-led New Bedford, Massachusetts, textile strike. The same year, a Comintern report, *The Communist International between the Fifth and Sixth World Congresses*, nonetheless claimed that the strike “was settled by the winning of the main demands.” Sixty years after the strike, Deak told a historian that “there was no settlement, really,” since the workers had returned with “no terms,” and around 20 workers (including himself) were blacklisted from the mills. (Deak became the city manager of nearby Garfield decades after the strike.) Workers in the city would remain unorganized for more than a decade. For its part, the UTW’s official history, published in 1950, did not even mention the strike.<sup>91</sup>

## Conclusion: The Aftermath of the Passaic Strike

Within the Comintern, the strike provided support for the turn during the late 1920s and early 1930s toward organizing dual unions. In the Comintern's "Third Period" (roughly 1928–34), the TUEL transformed itself into the Trade Union Unity League and began to organize Communist-led unions, including the National Textile Workers Union (NTWU). With Weisbord's help, the NTWU organized militant strikes in New Bedford, Massachusetts (1928), and Gastonia, North Carolina (1929).<sup>92</sup> In a cynical manner, the Passaic strike was cited as a prime example of the danger of not opposing the AFL in principle. At the Fourth Congress of the Comintern's trade-union body, the Profintern, in 1928, Stalin ally A. Lozovsky denounced the American Communists:

What should be the task of our comrades in America? One should think in organising the unorganised, of creating trade unions where none exist . . . But, comrades, they have in America a particular disease, the fetish of "dual unionism." This is so much feared by our comrades there that they are willing to give up anything to prevent the formation of parallel unions. Instead of organizing the 23 million workers who are unorganized, they are indulging in fruitless discussion.<sup>93</sup>

In the discussion, Gitlow opposed leaving the AFL and held up the UFC as an example of organizing the unorganized while avoiding dual unionism.<sup>94</sup> Lozovsky in his summary replied that "America with her 90% of unorganised workers is exactly the country where trade unions can most speedily be set up during strikes of unorganised workers." He criticized the insistence of joining the UTW: "So you see what happened in the name of unity, we agreed to the demands of the corrupt bureaucracy to recall from his post the chairman of the Strike Committee, the union collapsed and we are left without a damn thing to show." One might have expected this to have benefited the Lovestone faction. However, Lozovsky supported Foster's faction in the American party, so he used the fact that Lovestone was in the leadership of the party to blame the failure of Passaic on his faction.<sup>95</sup> This captures some of the nature of the cynicism that accompanied the Stalinization of the American party.

In the period of Lovestone's leadership, Weisbord was prominent in the Party's trade-union work. In 1928, Weisbord became the district organizer in Detroit, an important industrial center. After members complained, he earned the dubious honor of being attacked by Lovestone as too factional, being described as having "acted too often as a faction rather than Party leader and . . . not taken the comrades sufficiently into consideration, especially comrades of the former majority."<sup>96</sup> This did not prevent Weisbord from being assigned to the New Bedford and Gastonia strikes.

Having led the purge of Cannon and his supporters for Trotskyism in 1928, Lovestone and his remaining supporters were purged from the Party in 1929. Leadership in the Party fell to Earl Browder, who had been a prominent supporter of Foster. After he was expelled from the CP in 1929, Weisbord did not support Lovestone. Rather, he denounced Lovestone and formed the Communist League of Struggle and declared his sympathies with Trotsky. He soon earned Trotsky's ire for his attacks on Cannon's Communist League of America (Opposition) for supposedly being too focused on propaganda aimed at the ranks of the CP. The publication of his group, *Class Struggle*, is filled with denunciations of almost every single Communist leader of the era, except for the late Ruthenberg.<sup>97</sup> Weisbord would never again play a role in the class struggle as he had in the textile industry during the 1920s. Instead, the Stalinist CP and (to a lesser degree) Cannon's smaller Trotskyist forces would be prominent in the struggles to organize the unorganized into industrial unions during the 1930s. In many ways, the Passaic textile strike was a dress rehearsal for these future class battles. Weisbord himself would, along with his wife, Vera Buch Weisbord, continue the Communist League of Struggle through the mid-1930s.<sup>98</sup>

Weisbord was both a product and a victim of the degenerating CP. The cynicism of Stalinism, particularly under Lovestone, accentuated his worst traits. There is no way to tell if Weisbord would have remained a significant force on the left had it not been for the Stalinization of the CP. After all, his writing indicates that he could give as good as he got in factional nastiness, and he seems to have become more supercilious as time wore on. Sixty years after the strike, Deak recalled Weisbord as "an egomaniac." In his later writing, Weisbord's hostility to the entire



Communist leadership seems almost pathological, especially his insinuation that most of the leadership was in the service of both the U.S. and Soviet intelligence services. The correspondence between Weisbord and Draper in 1958 gives a sense of this as well.<sup>99</sup>

What is undeniable is that the combination of unprincipled factionalism and the Comintern's Stalinist intervention into the CP reached a crescendo in the aftermath of the Passaic strike. This meant that much of the strengths of the CP were squandered. But this should not obscure that these strengths existed. Along with the contemporary struggle to mobilize international protest to free anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, led by Cannon's ILD, the Passaic strike highlighted Communists' dedication, energy, creativity, bravery, and willingness to lead workers in struggle. Even in the conservative "prosperity" of the 1920s, the American working class—and American Communists—could not be written off as a factor in politics.

## NOTES

The author benefited from the help of the staff of several libraries and archives. The public libraries of Jersey City, Newark, North Bergen, and Passaic, New Jersey, were invaluable, as was the American Labor Museum/Botto House in Haledon, New Jersey. The High Point (North Carolina) Museum answered my questions about the Hillcrest Silk Company. I would also like to thank the staff of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University (particularly Dale Reed), the Prometheus Research Library, and Tamiment Library (New York University) for unending assistance. The Frank J. Guarini Library at New Jersey City University and the Carl Campbell Brigham Library in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, fulfilled my many interlibrary loan requests. Several scholars answered my disparate queries, including Marcella Bencivenni, Jamie H. Eves, David J. Goldberg, Gerald Meyer, and Kenyon Zimmer. I thank David Lee McMullen, perhaps the world's leading expert on Albert Weisbord, for encouragement and assistance. Finally, the two anonymous readers at the *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* provided advice that helped hone this article into its present form. All errors, of course, remain the author's own.

1. Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia: The Formative Period* (New York: Viking, 1960), 225. On the Passaic strike itself, see: See Michael Ebner, "The Passaic Strike and the Two I.W.W.s," *Labor History* 11, no. 4 (1970): 452–66. There are

several accounts of the strike by historians. These include: David Lee McMullen, *Strike! The Radical Insurrections of Ellen Dawson* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010); Paul L. Murphy et al., *The Passaic Strike of 1926* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1974); Morton Siegel, "The Passaic Textile Strike of 1926" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1952). The relevant chapter to Vera Buch Weisbord, *A Radical Life* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1977) also provides an overview of the strike, combining the author's firsthand accounts with information from secondary sources.

2. The classic account is Theodore Draper's two-volume study of the CP, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking, 1957) and *American Communism and Soviet Russia*. James P. Cannon, *The First Ten Years of American Communism* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1964), comprising letters to Draper, is a useful primary account of the early Communist movement. For more recent scholarly studies of the early CP, see Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); and Jacob A. Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919–1929* (Leiden: Brill, 2014). See also the introduction to *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 1992). The following paragraphs are drawn from these sources.
3. In 1923–24, the party, trying to cash in on what it perceived as an upsurge in agrarian radicalism, tailed the farmer-labor movement, thus threatening to dissolve the working-class nature of the party into populism. The way in which this was done antagonized much of the young party's support in the leadership of the trade unions, particularly in Chicago. When much of the farmer-labor movement coalesced around La Follette, the party began to all but openly support him—despite the Wisconsin Senator's wanting nothing to do with the Communists—until the Comintern instructed the party that it was impermissible to support La Follette and forced the CP to stand its own candidates. While this prevented the party from liquidating itself into a non-working-class movement, this further alienated Communists from what few labor leaders had supported it. As a result, in 1923–24, many Communists were expelled from the trade unions. This episode is dealt with in detail in the sources cited in the previous note.
4. *The Fourth National Convention of the Workers (Communist) Party* (Chicago: Daily Worker Publishing Company, 1925), 39. The figures used are the average monthly dues-paying membership. These fluctuate widely. In March 1925, there were 19,371 dues-paying members, but in April, there were only 13,910 dues-paying members.
5. The Ruthenberg faction, under the organizational leadership of Lovestone, was itself a nest of intrigue. For example, in October 1926, Lovestone complained about Ballam and

- other members of his own faction: "Altogether too many of our boys are lazy, irresponsible and stupid." [Lovestone] to "Dear Boys," 6 March 1926, in Jay Lovestone Papers, Hoover Institution Library, Stanford University, Box 197, Folder 5. Another cofactionalist whom Lovestone disliked was Robert Minor.
6. This article does not deal with Stalinism in depth; although it was a crucial aspect of the party's internal life in the period, its effects on the Passaic strike were less direct. In short, Stalinism is used to refer to the degeneration of the Soviet Union due to isolation and poverty, leading to the rise of a bureaucracy led by Stalin that opposed the original Bolshevik program of international revolution in favor of "socialism in one country." This process—in the Soviet Union and in the Comintern—was neither overnight nor obvious at the time to many Communists. For the classic analysis of the rise of Stalin, see Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed: What Is the Soviet Union and Where Is It Going?* (New York: Doubleday, 1937); on the Communist International, see Leon Trotsky, *The Third International after Lenin* (New York: Pioneer, 1936). For a study of the effects of Stalinism on the American Communists Party, see Palmer, *James P. Cannon*; Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism*.
  7. William Z. Foster, *Organize the Unorganized* (Chicago: Trade Union Educational League, 1926), 10, 15–16.
  8. *New York Times*, 10 October 1915.
  9. See James B. Kenyon, *Industrial Localization and Metropolitan Growth: The Paterson-Passaic District* (Chicago: University of Chicago Department of Geography, 1960), 61–62. Travel across the Hudson River was more difficult during this time, since the Holland Tunnel did not open until late 1927, while the George Washington Bridge and Lincoln Tunnel would not open until 1931 and 1937, respectively.
  10. On the conditions of the textile workers in Passaic, see Mary Heaton Vorse, *The Passaic Textile Strike, 1926–1927* (Passaic, NJ: General Relief Committee, 1927).
  11. See Philip Newman, "The First I.W.W. Invasion of New Jersey," *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society* 58 (1940): 268–83. For a regional overview, see B. M. Selekmán, Henriette R. Walter, and W. J. Crouper, *The Clothing and Textile Industries in New York and Its Environs: Present Trends and Probable Future Development* (New York: Regional Plans of New York and Its Environs, 1925). On broader pressures in the textile industry, see Gladys L. Palmer, "The Mobility of Weavers in Three Textile Centers," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 55, no. 3 (1941): 460–87. According to Mary Heaton Vorse, several of the plants in Passaic had been seized by the U.S. government during the First World War under the Alien Property Custodian Act (*Passaic Textile Strike*, 8). According to the obituary in the *New York Times* (28 October 1939) for Julius Forstmann, the

- German-born textile magnate's "family had been engaged in the woolen industry in Europe since the Middle Ages."
12. See Kenyon Zimmer, "'The Whole World Is Our Country': Immigration and Anarchism in the United States, 1885–1940" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2010), chap. 3; and Salvatore Salerno, "Paterson's Italian Anarchist Silk Workers and the Politics of Race," *WorkingUSA* 8, no. 5 (2005): 611–25.
  13. The so-called Detroit IWW, led by De Leon, stressed political organizing as well labor militancy, which conflicted with the so-called Chicago IWW, led by William D. Haywood, which emphasized militancy at the point of production and tended to dismiss political organization. According to Zimmer, Paterson was a base for De Leon's supporters as well as his anarchist enemies.
  14. On the history of strikes in Paterson-Passaic in general, see Grace Hutchins, *Labor and Silk* (New York: International Publishers, 1929), chap. 9. The development of the 1912 Paterson-Passaic strike can be seen in the *New York Times*; see 24 February, 28 February, 24 March (quoted), 26 March, 27 March, 30 March, and 11 April 1912 editions. For a description of the strike, see Giuseppe Iannarelli, *Lo Sciorpero dei Tessitori di Seta di Paterson New Jersey* (New York: Nicoletti Brothers, 1916). For the scholarly treatment of the 1912 strike, see Newman, "The First I.W.W. Invasion"; and Ebner, "The Passaic Strike and the Two I.W.W.s." The relationship between the 1912 and 1913 strikes is more complicated than can be dealt with here, but these two articles analyze it in-depth. See also Esther Liberman, "The Influence of Left-Wing Radicalism in the Paterson Silk Strikes of 1912–13, and the Passaic Woolen Strike 1926," (graduate paper, Columbia University, 1965), copy in New Jersey Collections, Alexander Library, Rutgers University.
  15. Information on the 1919 strike is taken from David J. Goldberg, "Immigrant Workers and Labor Organization, 1912–1926: Lawrence, Massachusetts, and Passaic, New Jersey," in *Work, Recreation, and Culture: Essays in American Labor History*, ed. Martin H. Blatt and Martha K. Norkunas (New York: Garland, 1996), 216–17; and David J. Goldberg, "Twentieth-Century Textile Strikes," in *The Encyclopedia of Strikes in American History*, ed. Immanuel Ness et al. (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 2009), 333–34.
  16. Selekman, Walter, and Crouper, *The Clothing and Textile Industries in New York and Its Environs*, 28.
  17. *Passaic Herald News*, 18 October 1976, in Passaic Strike Vertical File, Julius Forstmann Public Library, Passaic, New Jersey
  18. *New York Times*, 26 September 1925.

19. Although Deak has been described as born in Hungary, both the 1920 and 1940 census list him as being born in New York, in 1905 and 1906, respectively; both list his parents as Hungarian-born (information taken from <https://familysearch.org> [accessed 24 September 2013]).
20. On Dawson, see McMullen, *Strike! The Radical Insurrections of Ellen Dawson*, especially part 2.
21. An overview of the first month of the strike can be found in J. O. Bentall, "The Passaic Strike Encounters the Courts," *Labor Defender*, April 1926, 57–58. The strikers' position is spelled out in two pamphlets issued by the relief committee, *Hell in New Jersey: The Story of the Passaic Strike Told in Pictures* (Passaic: General Relief Committee, 1926) and *The Textile Strike of 1926* (Passaic: General Relief Committee, 1926); Weisbord also wrote two pamphlets on the strike. The first, *Passaic* (1926), was published by the CP while the second, *Passaic Reviewed*, although undated (though probably published in 1976) was written some time after his expulsion from the CP and is hostile toward the party.
22. On the 1925 Connecticut strike, see Jamie H. Eves, "David Moxon's Forgotten Files: The American Thread Company Strike of 1925," at [www.millmuseum.org/history/sweat-of-their-brows/strike/](http://www.millmuseum.org/history/sweat-of-their-brows/strike/) (accessed 20 June 2014).
23. C. E. Ruthenberg, "The Achievements of Our Party," n.d. [November 1926], in Comintern archives, 515:1:923; Anthony Bimba, *The History of the American Working Class* (New York: International Publishers, 1937 [originally 1927]), 308; Martha Stone Asher, "Recollections of the Passaic Textile Strike of 1926," *Labor's Heritage* 2, no. 2 (1990): 8; James P. Cannon, "Passaic Strike Anniversary: Some Lessons in Militant Labor Leadership for the Future," *Militant*, 22 February 1930, reprinted in James P. Cannon, *The Left Opposition in the U.S., 1928–31* (New York: Monad, 1981), 241. One Communist sent to Passaic was Vera Buch, who would marry Weisbord. At some point during the strike, Weisbord also apparently had a short-lived "unhappy affair" with Elizabeth Gurley Flynn; see Nunzio Pernicone, *Carlo Tresca: Portrait of a Rebel* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2010), 244.
24. The Comintern archives are now part of the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) in Moscow. The documents cited here are largely taken from the microfilm edition consulted at Tamiment Library, New York University. For all documents, the original location is given in the form of *fond:opisi:deli*; for example 515:1:314. This will enable the researcher to find the relevant documents in either the Moscow archives or the microfilm version.

25. Biographical information taken from *Passaic Reviewed* (Albert Weisbord, *Passaic Reviewed* [San Francisco: Germinal Press, 1976]). According to the 1920 census, a 19-year-old Albert Weisbord lived in Brooklyn with his father, the Russian-born Jacob Weisbard (his mother and siblings all spelled their last name Weisbord, as did his father in the 1930 census). See: <https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/MJ5Q-KC5> (accessed 20 June 2014). *Trow's New York Partnership and Corporation Directory for Manhattan and the Bronx* 67 (January 1919) listed Jacob Weisbard as the owner of the Good Made Shoulder Pad Company, located on East Fourth Street in Manhattan (456). On Weisbord's chess activity, see the *New York Times*, 1 January 1918, 26 December 1918, 26 December 1918, and 30 January 1920, and *American Chess Bulletin* 17 (1920): 30. On his election to Phi Beta Kappa, see *City College Quarterly* 16 no. 3 (October 1920): 22.
26. There are discrepancies among historians whether Weisbord finished law school or dropped out. The Harvard *Crimson* (12 April 1926) wrote that Weisbord "was graduated from the Harvard Law School two years ago." This was confirmed by the registrar's office of the Law School, whose records note he was awarded a law degree on 19 June 1924 (Samantha Fitzgerald, Harvard Law School Registrar's Office, to author, 22 June 2011). On Weisbord's early Communist activity, see his letter to Theodore Draper, 26 August 1959, available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/weisbord/Draper.htm> (accessed 20 June 2014).
27. Weisbord, *Passaic Reviewed*, 1-21.
28. Weisbord, *Passaic Reviewed*. The pamphlet is available online at <http://www.weisbord.org/Reviewed.htm> (accessed 20 June 2014). Quote about not receiving help from *Passaic Herald News*, 18 October 1976, in Passaic Strike Vertical File.
29. *New York Times*, 27 November 1977.
30. On the city central committees in the New York region, see Chas. Krumbein to C. E. Ruthenberg, 12 May 1925, in Comintern archives, 515:1:489. On the membership, see the monthly "Summary Branch Report for District 2," for 1924 in Comintern archives, 515:1:380. To get an sense of the extent of organization in New Jersey, see "Minutes of the New Jersey State Conference of the Workers Party Held in Newark," 5 April 1925, in Comintern archives, 515:1:550. The exact number of branches and total membership fluctuated monthly, no doubt reflecting the ebbs and flows of membership, less-than-regular payment of dues, and administrative problems. Part of Bolshevization was supposed to be the conversion of party branches into workplace-based shop nuclei, although this was often more desired than real.
31. On the Newark Communists, see Warren Grover, "The Newark Communist Party: 1919 to the New Deal," presentation at the Newark Historical Society, 3 December 2012,

- available at <http://www.newarkhistorysociety.org/resources.html> (accessed 20 June 2014). On the injunction against the restaurant workers, see the *New York Times*, 14 August 1926. The case, *Gevas v. Greek Restaurant Workers' Club* 99 NJ Eq. 770 (1926), became important in labor law; in part the ruling relies on the precedent set by the injunction against the Passaic strikers, discussed below.
32. The numbers are taken from "Summary Branch Report for District 2," for March and June 1924, in Comintern archives, 515:1:380. The outgoing correspondence file for the district organizer (first Charles Krumbein and then William Weinstone) for 1924-25 is in Comintern archives, 515:1:489. This includes regular lists of new industrial nuclei. On the existence of a Communist group, see statement by Jacob S. Bailin, secretary of Passaic CCC, included in Molly [Siegel] to Jay Lovestone, 27 January 1926, in Comintern archives, 515:1:747.
  33. On the CP election campaign in New Jersey, see "Minutes of the Special D.E.C. Meeting," 12 February 1925, in Comintern archives, 515:1:545; "Minutes of the New Jersey State Conference of the Workers Party," 5 April 1925, in Comintern archives, 515:1:550. For the election results, see official *Statement of the Result of the Election* (1926), posted on New Jersey's website, <http://www.state.nj.us/state/elections/1920-1970-results/1925-general-election.pdf> (accessed 20 June 2014).
  34. John J. Ballam, "Report on Trade Union Educational League; Trade Union Fractions; Industrial Composition of Party in District One (Boston)," 23 December 1925, in Comintern archives, 515:1:544. On Communist organizing among textile workers in Massachusetts, see also Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 223.
  35. On the strike, see the *Newark Evening News*, August-October 1924; in file "Strikes—Paterson Silk Workers, 1911-1924," in *Evening News* morgue, reel no. S-55, Newark Public Library. See *Newark Evening News*, 8 October 1924 and 16 October 1924, for the activity of Communist leader H. M. Wicks, a supporter of Ruthenberg, during the strike.
  36. On New Jersey, see: "Report of the National Committee Needle Trades Section, TUEL," [April/May] 1925; on the 1925 silk strike (and mention of Communist activity), see Hutchins, *Labor and Silk*, 147-50. Bert Miller, "Report of the District Industrial Organizer, District 2, from September 1 1925 to January 15 1926"; Miller, "Report of the Industrial Organizer, District 2," 28 September 1926; Miller, "Industrial Activity, District 2," 25 October 1925, all in Lovestone Papers, Box 220, Folder 3; W. Z. Foster to "Comrade Zimmerman," 11 November 1924, original in Zimmerman Papers, Cornell University, copy in Prometheus Research Library (PRL) collection.

37. Joseph Manley, report on Paterson CCC meeting on 6 February 1925; Charles Krumbein, "Minutes of the Special DEC Meeting," 14 February 1925, both in Comintern archives, 515:1:545.
38. Bert Miller, "Report of the Industrial Organizer, District 2, Paterson Situation," 15 October 1925, in Comintern archives, 515:1:548; Minutes of the Meeting of the Political Committee [of District 2], 23 October 1925, in Comintern archives, 515:1:547; Minutes of DEC Meeting, 25 October 1925, in Comintern archives, 515:1:545. These minutes would seem to solve the question posed by Bryan Palmer about Weisbord's work in Passaic, that "whether he went on party orders or on under his own steam is still open to debate" (Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Revolutionary Left*, 256).
39. For Weisbord's articles, see *Daily Worker*, 6 July 1925 and 27 August 1925. Examples of *Daily Worker* articles on Paterson include 7 July 1925 and 29 July 1925. Notices of the textile conference can be found in the *Daily Worker*, 5 August 1925; 1 September 1925. On 7 August 1925, the paper contained an article textile workers in Shelton, Connecticut; on 10 August 1925, there was an article about a textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts; on 25 August 1925, there were articles about strikes in Massachusetts, upstate New York, and Rhode Island. On 17 September 1925, Bert Miller wrote to C. E. Ruthenberg (in Comintern archives, 515:1:490): "We have made absolutely no preparation for the Textile Conference Called here for Sunday, September 20. I have received no instructions other than the first mimeographed noticed . . . I don't know whether anything is being done about it all."
40. *Daily Worker*, 8 October 1925, 24 October 1925, 29 October 1925, 30 October 1925, 4 November 1925, and 6 November 1925. On the Hungarian federation and Passaic, see Thomas L. Sakmyster, "A Communist Newspaper for Hungarian Americans: The Strange Case of Új Előre," *Hungarian Studies* 32, no. 1/2 (2005): 47–48.
41. "Industrial Activity District 2" [by Bert Miller?], 25 October 1925, in Comintern archives 515:1:548.
42. Bert Miller to C. E. Ruthenberg, 31 October 1925, in Comintern archives, 515:1:490.
43. Albert Weisbord, "Crucial Moments in Textile Strikes," *Class Struggle*, June 1931, available at <http://www.weisbord.org> (accessed 20 June 2014). Since in 1931 Foster was the leader of the official CP, Cannon was Weisbord's rival in the Trotskyist movement, and Lovestone headed his own competing dissident Communist grouping, Weisbord's assertions from this period must be taken with a grain of salt, given his own tendency toward self-aggrandizement.
44. *Daily Worker*, 2 November 1925; *Daily Worker*, 3 November 1925.



45. Flynn was a former leader of the IWW. She would eventually become a leader of the CP, but at the time was not affiliated with the party. Tresca was a leading Italian American anarchist.
46. The current author is working on a study of the Hillcrest Silk strike. In the interim, the best coverage can be found in the *Jersey Journal* (particularly the North Hudson and Hoboken edition) and the *Hudson Dispatch* from October through December 1925. The “Nel Campo del Lavoro” column of New York’s *Il Progreso Italo-Americano* also ran several articles about the strike from October through December 1925; see in particular 20 November and 25 November 1925. The strike is covered in a series of articles in the *Daily Worker*, several written by Weisbord; see 30 October 1925; 1 November 1925; 12 November 1925; 17 November 1925; 21 November 1925; 8 December 1925; 15 December 1925; 16 December 1925; 29 December 1925. The *New York Times* ran an article on the strike on 18 November 1925. On the injunctions, see also Albert Weisbord to Bert Miller, 21 December 1925, in Comintern archives, 515:1:490. On the subsequent history of the Hillcrest Silk Company, see *New York Times*, 26 May 1926 (lay-offs); 22 April 1931 (leasing New Jersey plant); 24 December 1931 (expanding North Carolina plant). Sources differ on the location of the plant, placing it alternatively in Union City, West New York, or North Bergen. This is due in part to the confusing street numbering system; in 1940, the towns of northern Hudson County unified their street numbering systems. Originally at 515-523 30th Street, North Bergen, the address is now on 74th Street. I am grateful to Cynthia T. Harris and John Beekman of the New Jersey Room of the Jersey City Public Library; Chelsea Neary of the North Bergen Public Library; and Marian Inabinett, of the High Point (North Carolina) Museum, for information on the Hillcrest plant.
47. *Daily Worker*, 31 October 1925 (New Jersey Young Workers League); 22 December 1925 (worker correspondents); 24 December 1925 (Paterson workers). Worker correspondents were part of the party’s Bolshevization campaign, with the goal of rooting the party’s press more deeply in the struggle’s of the working class. Several of Weisbord’s articles from Hillcrest were published with this designation. Art Shields’ article was run as a dispatch from Federated Press. According to an article by Tim Wheeler in the *People’s World* (18 May 2007), Shields had joined the *Daily Worker* editorial staff in 1924. Minutes of the Trade-Union Committee of the CEC, 4 January 1926, in collection of PRL.
48. Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 141.

49. Report by Gitlow on meeting of CEC Textile Committee at Passaic. 2 February 1926, in PRL collection. The report also contains a fascinating account of the start of the strike from Weisbord's perspective.
50. Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 215-23; statement by William F. Dunne and James P. Cannon, in *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism*, 361.
51. Quoted in Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 228-29.
52. The broader context is dealt with in Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Left*, and Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism*.
53. Bert Miller to C. E. Ruthenberg and J. W. Johnstone, 15 January 1925 (on TUEL letterhead), in Comintern archives, 515:1:490.
54. The Miller-Ruthenberg correspondence is in the Comintern archives, 515:1:490; Weisbord's regular reports to Miller are in the Comintern archives, 515:1:549.
55. Miller to Ruthenberg, 31 October 1925, in Comintern archives, 515:1:490.
56. W.W. Weinstone to Jack Johnstone, 2 November 1925, in Comintern archives, 515:1:549.
57. Ruthenberg to Bert Miller, 6 November 1925, in Comintern archives, 515:1:490.
58. Bert Miller to "Dear Comrade," 13 November 1925 in Comintern archives, 515:1:490. There is no recipient specified but presumably it was Ruthenberg or an equally important Communist leader; Albert Weisbord, undated document on UFC, in Comintern archives, 515:1:549; C. E. Ruthenberg to Bert Miller, 17 November 1925, in Comintern archives, 515:1:490. Weisbord's document is undated and in another file, but begins: "I have been requested by Comrade Bert Miller to state my view on the United Front Committee of Textile Workers movement."
59. Bert Miller to C. E. Ruthenberg, 20 November 1925; Bert Miller, "Dear Comrades," 23 November 1923, both in Comintern archives, 515:1:490.
60. C. E. Ruthenberg to Bert Miller, 25 November 1925, in Comintern archives, 515:1:490.
61. Bert Miller to C. E. Ruthenberg, 5 December 1925; C. E. Ruthenberg to Bert Miller, 8 December 1925; Albert Weisbord to Bert Miller, 21 December 1925, all in Comintern archives, 515:1:490.
62. Liberman, "The Influence of Left-Wing Radicalism," 26; *Hell in New Jersey*, 17-18.
63. *Hell in New Jersey*; Eugene Lyons, *Assignment in Utopia* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1991 [1937]), 42.
64. See Wagenknecht's letters to his wife, Hortense, 2 March 1926; 8 March 1926; 26 March 1926, in the Alfred and Hortense Wagenknecht and Helen and Carl Winter Family Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, Box 1, Folder 9; *Passaic Daily Herald*,

- 2 July; 8 July 1926; On the film, see Kevin Brownlow, *Behind the Mask of Innocence* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 498–508.
65. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Revolutionary Left*, 256.
  66. Cannon, *First ten Years of American Communism*, 142.
  67. Foster, speech at first session of the American Commission of the Comintern, 16 February 1926, in PRL collection.
  68. See Weisbord, *Passaic Reviewed*, 1–21; Engdahl at American Commission, 17 June 1927, in Comintern archives, 495:37:12; “K” [William Kruse?] to “Dear J” [Engdahl?], 8 August 1927, in Comintern archives, 515:1:946; and Emil Gardos to “Dear Comrades,” 17 August 1927, in Comintern archives, 515:1:1046.
  69. *New York Times*, 3 March 1926.
  70. Bentall, “The Passaic Strike Encounters the Court,” 58; *Forstmann and Huffman Co. v. The United Front Committee of Textile Workers*, 99 NJ Eq. 230 (1925–26). The case was decided on 12 May 1926.
  71. Michael, “Framing Up on Passaic,” *Labor Defender*, September 1926,
  72. Alfred Wagenknecht to Hortense Wagenknecht, 26 March 1926, in Wagenknecht and Winter Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 9.
  73. See “The Fight for the Defense of the Passaic Strike,” *Labor Defender*, June 1926.
  74. Mary Heaton Vorse, “The War in Passaic,” *Nation*, 17 March 1926, in *Rebel Pen: The Writings of Mary Heaton Vorse*, ed. Dee Garrison (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985), 105.
  75. Edward P. Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 227; James P. Cannon, “The United Front at Passaic,” *Labor Defender* (June 1926) in *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism*, 378–79; Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 142; and Siegel, “The Passaic Textile Strike of 1926,” chap. 10.
  76. Alfred Wagenknecht to Hortense Wagenknecht, 10 April 1926, in Wagenknecht and Winter Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 10.
  77. *Passaic Daily Herald*, 14 July 1926; *Passaic Daily News*, 14 July 1926; *Passaic Daily Herald*, 29 July 1926; and *Passaic Daily News*, 29 July 1926; see also *New York Times*, 30 July 1926.
  78. *Jersey Journal*, 27 October 1925. According Vera Buch Weisbord, “Our principle strategy upon which success depended was to extend the strike to bring in the silk mills workers and dye workers of Paterson and vicinity” (*A Radical Life*, 118).
  79. “Heroic Class Battles in Textiles: Communist Organizing in the 1920’s,” *Women and Revolution* 18 (Spring 1978): 6–10; Albert Weisbord, “Crucial Moments in Textile Strikes,” *Class Struggle*, June 1931, available at [www.weisbord.org](http://www.weisbord.org) (accessed 20 June 2014);

- and Alfred Wagenknecht to Hortense Wagenknecht, 26 March 1926, in Wagenknecht and Winter Family Papers, Box 1, Folder 9.
80. *Newark Evening News*, 1 April 1926, in file "Strikes—Passaic Textile Workers, April 1926," in *Evening News* morgue, reel no. S-55.
  81. On 22 April 1926, UTW president Thomas F. McMahon wrote to Weisbord: "We have been informed . . . by organizer Harry F. Hilfers, of the American Federation of Labor, with whom I was speaking today over the phone, that in talking with you over the phone, you have decided, or rather informed him, that if you were the cause of putting an end to conferences between employers, civic groups and workers for the purpose of bringing the strike in Passaic to a satisfactory conclusion, you would step aside" (typescript in Comintern archives, 515:1:912). See *New York Times*, 22 April 1926; 24 April 1926; and 27 April 1926.
  82. *New York Times*, 22 April 1926.
  83. Chairman [Weisbord] and Secretary [Deak] of the UFC to Thomas F. McMahon, 27 April 1926; and Thomas F. McMahon to Albert Weisbord, 30 April 1926. Typescripts of both letters in Comintern archives, 515:1:912.
  84. On Moore's refusal to meet with Weisbord, see *New York Times*, 24 April 1926 and 27 April 1926. According to the *Newark Evening News* (3 July 1926), Hilfers stated: "Calling thousands of men and women out in mid winter . . . when they had been working for months on half-time and less, with no prospect of improvement, meant defeat from the beginning."
  85. Foster supporter Joseph Zack also opposed this policy; see his statement attached to 8 May 1927 PC minutes, in PRL collection. *Passaic Daily Herald*, 2 July 1926 and *Passaic Daily News*, 13 August 1926. On Weisbord's acceptance of these terms, see his letter to W. Jett Lauck, 15 August 1926, in Comintern archives, 515:1:912. Siegel, "The Passaic Textile Strike of 1926," 250; Weisbord, *Passaic*, 58; and Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 231. In a letter to Theodore Draper decades after the strike, Weisbord summed up his position: "1. I was against my withdrawal; 2. I was against joining the UTW if I had to withdraw; 3. I was reconciled to my temporary withdrawal, if the workers could get a just and speedy settlement, even if that meant also joining the UTW without me; 4. I obeyed the CP decision because I thought that we would have situation 3 realized" (8 September 1958, posted at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/weisbord/Draper.htm> [accessed 20 June 2014]); I am thankful for David McMullen for pointing this out to me. On the expulsion of the Passaic local, see Siegel, "The Passaic Textile Strike," 343.

86. *New York Times*, 12 October 1926. On Wise and the Passaic strike, including his criticism of the mill owners as “breeders of communism and fomenters of revolt,” see Melvin I. Urofsky, *The Voice That Spoke for Justice: The Life and Times of Stephen S. Wise* (Albany: State University of New York, 1982), 232–33.
87. Cannon, “Passaic Strike Anniversary,” 243–44. At this time, Cannon was politically hostile to the Foster faction, which controlled the CP; Lovestone, who had formed his own organization; and Weisbord, whose group fancied itself the true Trotskyists in the U.S. and denounced Cannon’s own group.
88. Undated manuscript, marked “Ellen Dawson Speech on Passaic for AFL Convention.” There is no date, nor is there any indication of whether she was actually able to give the speech. In Comintern archives, 515:1:912.
89. Jay Lovestone to W. W. Weinstone, 20 October 1926, in Comintern archives, 515:1:746.
90. Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict That Shaped American Unions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 31.
91. *Passaic Daily News*, 1 March 1927; and *Dateline Clifton*, 20 January 1982, in Passaic Strike Vertical File. On the last workers to return—dye workers in Lodi—see *New York Times*, 1 March 1927. On the humiliating end of the strike at the hands of the UTW, see Siegel, “The Passaic Textile Strike of 1926,” chap. 9; Robert R. R. Brooks, “The United Textile Workers of America” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1935), 260–65; *The Communist International between the Fifth and Sixth World Congresses, 1924–28* (London: Communist Party of Great Britain, 1928), 342; and Gustav Deak, interviewed by Joe Doyle, 13 January 1986, in Passaic Textile Strike Oral History Project, 12, 33. For the official history, see *The AFL Textile Workers: A History of the United Textile Workers of America* (Washington: United Textile Workers of America, 1950), 18.
92. On the New Bedford strike, see Daniel Georgianna and Roberta Aronson, *The Strike of ’28* (New Bedford, MA: Spinner, 1993); on the Gastonia strike, see John A. Salmond, *Gastonia: The Story of the Loray Mill Strike* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995). On the Trade Union Unity League, see Edward P. Johanningsmeier, “The Trade Union Unity League: American Communists and the Transition to Industrial Unionism: 1928–1934,” *Labor History* 42, no. 2 (2001): 159–77; and Victor G. Devinatz, “A Reevaluation of the Trade Union Unity League, 1929–1934,” *Science and Society* 71, no. 1 (January 2007): 33–58.
93. Lozovsky’s speech in the *Bulletin of the IV Congress of the Red International of Labour Unions*, no. 3, evening session, 19 March 1928, in Charles Zimmerman Papers, Tamiment Institute, Box 2.

94. *Bulletin of the IV Congress*, 22 March 1928. (By this time, the bulletins had ceased to be numbered.)
95. Lozovsky, *Bulletin of the IV Congress*, 24 March 1928.
96. Minutes of Political Committee meeting number 33, 2 May 1928, in Lovestone Papers, Box 225, Folder 11.
97. See Albert Weisbord, "My Expulsion from the Communist Party," part 1, *Class Struggle*, August/September 1931, and part 2, *Class Struggle*, December 1931; Vera Buch Weisbord, "The Party Record of James P. Cannon" (1978?). These (and more examples of Weisbord's thought) can be found on [www.weisbord.org](http://www.weisbord.org). On his suspension from the CP, see *New York Times*, 17 December 1929.
98. Albert Weisbord died in 1977 and Vera Buch Weisbord died in 1987; see *New York Times*, 28 April 1977 and 13 September 1987, for their obituaries. A more substantial obituary for Vera Buch Weisbord is in the *Chicago Tribune*, 9 September 1977, and, of course, her autobiography, *A Radical Life*, provides much more details on her and her husband's lives.
99. Gustav Deak interviewed by Joe Doyle, 13 January 1986, in Passaic Strike Oral History Project, American Labor History Museum; for Weisbord's correspondence with Draper, see <http://www.weisbord.org/Draper.htm> (accessed 20 June 2014).

